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SUBJECT: UKRAINE WELCOMES EU EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Classified By: Political Counselor Colin Cleary. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) President Yushchenko welcomed the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership as "a victory of the European idea." He underlined that Belarus in particular had a "very important role" to play. Ukraine aspires to a leadership role in the Partnership, but officials emphasize that it in no way substitutes for Ukraine's aspiration for EU membership. Ukrainian officials hope for completion of an Association Agreement, including a Free Trade Agreement, with the EU in the latter half of 2010. End Summary.

Yushchenko Touts Inclusion of Belarus

¶2. (C) Fresh from his May 6 bilateral meeting with Lukashenka, President Yushchenko welcomed the Eastern Partnership as an initiative that would promote security and democracy in the partner states. He said it represented "a victory for the European idea." Yushchenko asserted that both Ukraine and Belarus had a common interest in using the Partnership to expand ties with the EU. Lukashenka, following his meeting with Yushchenko, thanked Ukraine for its advocacy. Yushchenko noted that Belarus must be part of European processes and had "a very important role" to play. Ihor Zhovkva, Chief of Staff to Deputy PM Nemyria agreed that the Partnership's engagement with Belarus was a priority for Ukraine. Isolation, he told us, had not worked. Despite Lukashenka, it was important to keep lines open to the rest of Belarussian society.

Neighborhood Policy Complementarity

¶3. (C) MFA interlocutors regard the Eastern Partnership as complementary to bilateral Neighborhood Policy agendas, rather than a repackaging of the neighborhood approach. First Secretary in the Division for Analysis and Prognostics of MFA's Directorate for the European Union Serhii Leshenko told us that the wording of the Prague Joint Declaration was important. The six Partners had been successful in holding out for a clear statement that the Partnership would not prejudice any individual Partner's EU aspirations. He added that the labeling in the Joint Declaration of the Partners as "eastern European" represented a small, but notable victory. (Leshenko confided his doubts as to whether the Member States truly regard Azerbaijan as European in any sense.)

¶4. (C) Leshenko said the Partnership incorporates elements of and is modeled on the Association Agreement format under negotiation between the EU and Ukraine. This includes the Association Agreement, its appended Free Trade Agreement, and the ongoing visa facilitation dialogue. He highlighted the potential for the Partners to leverage both a common position on regional issues and increased European engagement in the region. The ability to come together as a united regional grouping able to sit opposite the EU and (hopefully) speak

with one voice would have impact. Leshenko saw this as a particularly effective way to link Belarus to the region, while easing Minsk's fears about European pressure on human rights and democracy.

15. (C) For their part, interlocutors at the European Commission Delegation in Kyiv emphasize that Kyiv should be satisfied that they have been placed together with former Soviet countries in the partnership, rather than being grouped, as previously, with countries like Tunisia. Commission contacts opined that since Ukraine does not face the prospect of membership any time soon, it should embrace the Partnership as the best way to advance its case for membership. Ukraine, they said, now seems to agree.

Moscow's Wariness on Western Engagement with Belarus

16. (C) Leshenko said that negotiations regarding the Partnership had served as a convenient catalyst for restarting "defunct" relations between Ukraine and Belarus. Ukraine hopes to be an honest broker for Belarus in the process. He saw a role for Ukraine in drawing Belarus gradually into greater contact with the West through the Partnership. Leshenko predicted that Moscow would react negatively to Belarus' warming relations with its neighbors and the EU.

Border Issues

17. (C) Among the areas of the Partnership, Ukraine is most

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eager to engage on integrated border management (IBM). This is an area high on its bilateral priority list with Belarus, and in which both Belarus and Moldova have expressed interest. According to Leshenko, Ukraine sees the possibility to use IBM to create in effect a larger external border for the region, much like the current EU "skin". He pointed to the insufficient funding of the EP, and asked whether the U.S. might consider participating in or supporting IBM projects in the Eastern Partnership framework.

At the same time, Leshenko admitted it is unclear how the EU defines IBM in the context of the Partnership. Leshenko alluded to possible linkage by the EU between strict implementation of IBM to EU standards and further bilateral visa facilitation - a key Ukrainian policy goal.

Association Agreement Expected in 2010

18. (C) Leshenko noted that negotiations on the political and other sections of an Association Agreement were largely finished. However, a Free Trade Agreement is an integral part of the Association Agreement and a prerequisite to finishing negotiations. Yushchenko has now admitted his preferred deadline for negotiations -- the December 2009 EU-Ukraine Summit in Stockholm -- is no longer realistic, a change welcomed by our EU Commission Delegation interlocutors. Both they and Ihor Zhovkva predicted that Ukraine and the EU would not conclude the Free Trade Agreement until the second half of 2010 "at the earliest."

19. (C) In the meantime, the "New Practical Instrument" (NPI) which replaces the expired 2005 EU-Ukraine Action Plan is nearly ready -- though it still lacks a name. Leshenko said that, while the GoU holds out hope that the NPI's eventual name will reflect a membership perspective (something like "Association Road Map"), the NPI's value will be in clearly starting Association Agreement implementation before the Agreement is even effective. The GoU hopes to launch the NPI at the upcoming EU-Ukraine Cooperation Council meeting on June 16 in Luxembourg.

Comment

¶10. (C) Ukrainian officials appear to have gotten over earlier concerns that the Eastern Partnership, by linking Ukraine with countries that had little or no prospect for EU membership, might tarnish Ukraine's accession chances. Rather, the GOU has now decided to assume a leadership role in the Partnership. Furthermore, Ukraine values the potential of the Partnership to provide post-Soviet states with a forum of discussion with the EU -- and outside Moscow's control. The outreach to Belarus within the framework of the Partnership has emerged as a central selling point for Ukraine, complementing Ukraine's bilateral engagement with the Lukashenka government.

TAYLOR